

São Tomé & Príncipe

It won't be too long before you come on and feel the *leve-leve* in these two tiny islands that comprise Africa's second smallest nation. As soon as you touch down amid the palm-fringed beaches, crystal-clear water and barely explored jungles, you'll become infected with the pervasive national mood that translates to 'slowly, slowly' and loosely means 'it's all good, take it easy'.

And because you'll have this Portuguese-Creole flavoured tropical paradise almost to yourself (only about 20 tourists per week venture here), you can sip some of the world's best coffee, eat fresh fruits and seafood, delight on gourmet chocolate, stay in the crumbling *roças* (houses) of the old colonial plantations, dive and snorkel in uncharted waters, trek the endlessly biodiverse jungles and explore sleepy fishermen's villages at your own, leisurely pace, away from anything that resembles hustle and bustle. And in Príncipe, with one town and a total population of under 5000, you might be tempted to check your own pulse every few hours.

On these shores, the only way to raise your heart rate is to participate in the astoundingly sensual pelvis-mashing moves danced nightly in bars across the islands. São Tomé is the kind of place you may never have heard about, but once you visit, you just might never leave.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1000 sq km
- **ATMs** There are no ATMS; come with cash
- **Borders** Gabon lies 300km to the east
- **Budget** US\$85 per day
- **Capital** São Tomé
- **Language** Portuguese
- **Money** Dobra; US\$1 = 6740Db
- **Population** 193,000
- **Seasons** Dry (June to September), wet (October to May)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 239; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visas** Required by all; costs around US\$50



HIGHLIGHTS

- **São Tomé town** (p601) Wander amid the faded colonial buildings of this charming, sleepy capital town.
- **Roça São João** (p605) Dine on gourmet feasts and stay the night in this ethereal, rejuvenated plantation estate.
- **Banana Beach** (p606) Dive into the warm, crystal-clear waters of this deserted beach, one of many ringing the island of Príncipe.
- **Praia Jalé** (p605) Witness nesting sea turtles in this ecotourist haven at the southern-most point of São Tomé.
- **Ilhéu das Rolas** (p605) Straddle the equator and sun yourself on the divine white-sand beaches of this tiny islet off the south of São Tomé.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

São Tomé is an island of microclimates; at any time of year you're likely to find areas of cloudy and rainy skies and areas of sun. From March to May, though, the daily rains generally yield to blue skies and hot temperatures for beach goers, while trekkers might prefer the cool, dry air and cloudy skies from June to September.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** You can explore much of São Tomé in one week. Heading south, eat well and spend the night at Roça São João (p605), camp for a night at Praia Jalé (p605), take in a mangrove tour and then jump on the boat to Ilhéu das Rolas (p605) for a night or two. Head back to São Tomé town (p601) and day trek in the forest, stay the night at Bombaim (p606), and then head north to hit Neves (p605) for crabs and a night at Monteforte (p605).
- **Two Weeks** Follow the above itinerary and then fly on to Príncipe (p606) and chill out for at least a week in a deserted island paradise.

HISTORY

Before being 'discovered' and colonised by the Portuguese in the late 15th century, the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe were comprised of rainforests dense with vegetation and birdlife, but, most likely, no people (though there is a legend that present-day Angolares were really the first inhabitants of the land). The islands'

HOW MUCH?

- **A day's jungle trek** US\$50
- **Cup of good coffee** US\$0.80
- **Seed necklace** US\$1
- **Mangrove tour** US\$7
- **Fresh grilled con-con fish** US\$3

LP INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.20
- **1L bottled water** US\$1.20
- **Bottle of Creoula beer** US\$0.80
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$15
- **Grilled corn** US\$1

volcanic soil proved good for cultivation, and, under Portuguese rule, by the mid-16th century the islands were the foremost exporter of sugar, though the labour-intensive process required increasing amounts of slaves from Africa. When the price of sugar fell and slave labour proved difficult to control, the islands increasingly looked towards the slave trade to bolster the economy, becoming an important weigh station for slave ships heading from Africa to Brazil. In the 19th century two new cash crops, coffee and cocoa, overtook the old sugar plantations. By the early 20th century São Tomé was one of the world's largest producers of cocoa.

In 1876 slavery was outlawed, but was simply replaced with a similar system of forced labour for low wages. Contract workers came in from Mozambique, Cape Verde and other parts of the Portuguese empire. During these times there were frequent uprisings and revolts, often brutally put down by the Portuguese. In 1953 the Massacre of Batepá, in which many Africans were killed by Portuguese troops, sparked a full-fledged independence movement. Portugal held on, however, until the fall of the fascist government in 1974, after which it got out of its colonies in a hurry. São Tomé & Príncipe achieved independence on 12 July 1975.

The Portuguese exodus left the country with virtually no skilled labour, an illiteracy rate of 90%, only one doctor and many abandoned cocoa plantations. An economic crisis was inevitable. Manual Pinto da Costa, who

was the first president and, until then, a moderate, was forced to concede to many of the demands of the more radical members of his government. The majority of the plantations were nationalised four months after independence, legislation were passed prohibiting any one person from owning more than 100 hectares of land, and a people's militia was set up to operate within workplaces and villages.

The country remained closely aligned with Angola, Cuba and communist Eastern Europe until the demise of the Soviet Union, when Santoméans began to demand multiparty democracy. The first multiparty elections were held in early 1991 and led to the inauguration of the previously exiled

Miguel Trovoada as the new president in April of that year.

São Tomé & Príncipe Today

Elections in 2001 brought Fradique de Menezes to power. De Menezes pledged to use revenues from increased tourism and exploitation of the country's newly discovered offshore oilfields to improve the standard of living and modernise the islands' infrastructure. Grand changes seemed imminent. But complications with extracting the oil in addition to possible overestimations of the oil deposits have delayed economic progress, and there is a palpable growing restlessness in the deeply indebted and impoverished nation. A brief and bloodless coup attempt was peacefully resolved in 2003 while the president was out of the country. De Menezes was re-elected in 2006 in internationally observed, peaceful elections.

São Tomé presently scrapes by on US\$25 million a year of foreign aid and US\$5 million in cocoa exports.

CULTURE

Leve leve is the name of the game in São Tomé. Island life is slow and there's no use in getting all fussed up about anything. This is as evident in daily life as it is in the islands' politics. During the 2006 elections disruptions were rare. The very few villages that protested did so by politely turning vote staff away from their polling stations, saying essentially 'no water, no electricity, no votes, thank you'. It was done very cordially.

A recent influx of young repatriates from Portugal determined to make something good happen here has brought a new energy to the islands.

Outside the capital most Santoméans still live very simple island lives, with agriculture and fishing being the main occupations. In the morning the boats come in and fish are distributed, the market bustles late morning, a siesta is taken to avoid the afternoon heat and then it's time to drink some imported boxes of *vinho*. In the evening people gather wherever there's a TV set and a generator, or a full deck of cards.

PEOPLE

Santoméans are a mixed bunch, consisting of Mestiços, mixed-blood descendants of Portuguese colonists and African slaves; An-



golares, reputedly descendants of Angolan slaves who survived a 1540 shipwreck and now earn their livelihood fishing; Forros, descendants of freed slaves; Tongas, the children of Serviçais (contract labourers from Angola, Mozambique and Cape Verde when slavery was 'abolished'); and Europeans, primarily Portuguese.

About 80% of Santoméans belong to the Roman Catholic Church, though traditional animist beliefs are still strong.

ARTS & CRAFTS

In addition to the traditional crafts of the island (including intricately carved wooden boxes, masks, and seed and shell jewellery) there is a budding arts scene drawing international attention revolving around the Teia D'Arte gallery, which has held several Biennials and holds arts workshops for the local population. Famed São Tomé artist (and gourmet chef/TV host) João Carlos Silva heads up the gallery; his work can be seen at the Roça São João (p605).

Auto de Floripes (performed once a year, by the entire population of Príncipe) and Tchiloli are famous day-long pieces of musical theatre, that have been performed since the 16th century, and can now be seen as distinctly anticolonial stories.

Much of the music and dance of São Tomé is shared or influenced by other Portuguese-speaking nations, including Cape Verde, Brazil and Angola. Abandon preconceived notions of propriety as dancers pair off and dance the sensual *kizomba*, the *kadence* and *kuduru* nightly in bars.

ENVIRONMENT

The islands are of volcanic origin and almost 30% of the land is covered by high-altitude, virgin rainforest, referred to as the Obo, and filled with over 700 species of flora and a stunning array of bird species, some of which exist nowhere else in the world. In the interior are lakes, waterfalls and volcanic craters. Since São Tomé's forests were classified as biologically the second most important in Africa, they have received much attention, and conservation groups have started to set up protection programs and ecotourism outfits.

Outside the jungle the island is comprised of varying beaches, some of which are grounds for nesting sea turtles from October to De-

cember. Whales and dolphins can be observed from July to September.

FOOD & DRINK

Don't miss out on the *con-con*, an ugly, prehistoric-looking fish grilled and served with baked breadfruit. Traditional stews made with more than 20 different plants can take hours to prepare. Other traditional dishes include fish or meat with beans, rice or plantains, and omelettes cooked with endemic spices, some said to be aphrodisiacs. Palm wine, freshly gathered from the trees, is a local favourite.

SÃO TOMÉ TOWN

Once you get the hang of *leve-leve*, you'll delight in this mellow capital town of fading pastel colonial buildings along the seashore. São Tomé town has charm, a budding arts scene, and plenty of activities of its own and nearby, making it an ideal base from which to make day and overnight trips.

ORIENTATION

São Tomé town sits on Baía de Ana Chaves (Ana Chaves Bay). Most of the action takes place in one centralised area a few blocks in from the water, starting at the markets and spreading south to shops, banks and restaurants. The town is easily walkable, and even destinations further out take no longer than 15 minutes by foot. The airport is 4km north of town.

INFORMATION

There are many banks in town that exchange US dollars or euros in cash and travellers cheques for *dobras*. Better rates for cash can sometimes be found at the Mercado Municipal or in merchant shops. Big bills get better rates than smaller ones. There are no ATMs, but there are many Western Unions.

Café & Companhia (☎ 226622; mjpombo@hotmail.com; Praça da Amizade; per day US\$4) For great local information, where the foxy and friendly English-speaking MJ can point you in the right direction for anything you may need. The café acts as the centre of the expat community, and in addition to wi-fi, great food and good coffee, there are often flyers for upcoming cultural events and tourist attractions.

Hospital Ayres Menezes (☎ 221222, 221233) Located up the hill towards the airport. Serious cases will be flown out on the next plane to Gabon or Portugal.

Kia Web (☎ 227013; Rua Patrice Lumumba; per hr US\$1) If you're not travelling with a laptop, the next best place to check your email is this centrally located centre, which has well-appointed computers.

Mistral Voyages (☎ 23344; Rua Padre Pinto da Rocha) Has English-speaking staff and arranges car rentals and tours, including flights to Príncipe.

Navetur-Equator (☎ 222122; www.navetur-equator.st; Rua Viriato da Cruz) Locally owned and has a comprehensive list of services (flights, cars, tours, hotels) with an emphasis on responsible tourism. The friendly staff speaks some English and can help with a personalised itinerary.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

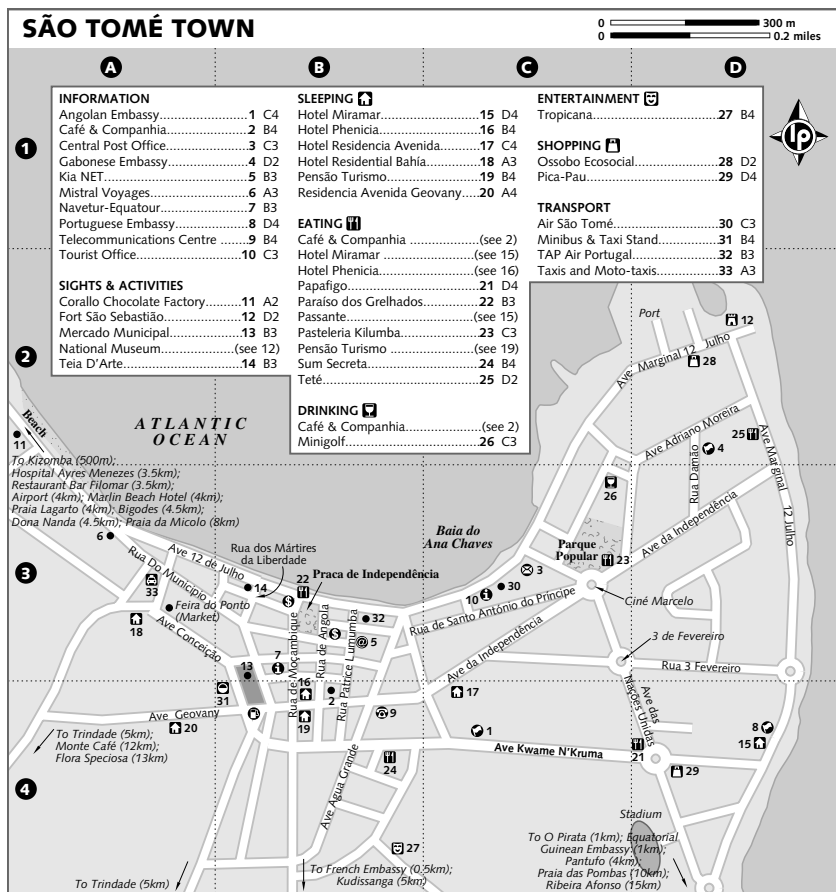
Beware of normal petty crimes, though the town is pretty safe. Roads and sidewalks can be riddled with holes.

SIGHTS

The **National Museum** (admission US\$3) in the old Fort São Sebastião has artefacts from all stages of the islands' colonial history, and makes shockingly explicit the contrast of the opulent lifestyles of the plantation owners and the squalor of their African workers. It's well worth the admission price just to walk on the ramparts of the old fort and catch views of the town.

The **Mercado Municipal** is a crowded, noisy, smelly adventure where you can have a great time without buying anything. It's a big change of pace from the islands' usual laid-back tranquillity.

Teia D'Arte (Rua dos Mártires da Liberdade), a gallery of contemporary painting and sculpture, is in the centre of town.



Tour the ocean-side, family-run **Corallo Chocolate Factory** (☎ 222236; www.claudiorcorallo.st) and taste test the finest chocolate and coffee beans in the world.

Just a few minutes' drive outside of town, watch the exotic flowers of the **Flora Speciosa** (☎ 908847; www.floraspeciosa.com) plantation get cut for worldwide shipping (on Friday), or just romp along the overgrown garden trails.

A short drive into the mountains is **Monte Café**, where you can observe the traditional coffee process at what once was the biggest coffee plantation, and which still makes some of the best coffee in the world.

There are beautiful beaches within a short walk of town but no good swimming ones. The best close swimming beach is **Praia Lagarto**.

ACTIVITIES

Trekking, snorkelling and dive trips leaving from town can be arranged through **Navetur-Equator** (☎ 222122; www.navetur-equator.st) or one of the dive centres: **Gandu Professional Diving** (www.divingafricagandu.com), **Club Maxel** (www.clubmaxel.st) or **Floga Excursions** (☎ 224394).

For early birds, Capoeira is practiced each morning starting at 6am on the beach near the old fort.

SLEEPING

Pensão Turismo (☎ 222340; Rua de Angola; r from US\$35) A small family-run *pensão* with a wonderful stained-glass dining area above a central street. Its five clean rooms share two bathrooms. Traditional meals (US\$7) are served daily.

Residência Avenida Geovany (☎ 223929, 903570; Ave Geovany; s/d with air-con US\$35/40; ☎) Just up the street from the Mercado Municipal, this hotel has decent rooms upstairs and friendly staff that speak some English. There are cheaper rooms downstairs but they are less attractive and comfortable.

Hotel Phenicia (☎ 224203/224204; Rua de Angola; r US\$65; ☎) Smack in the centre of town, the Phenicia has bright rooms, some with balconies. The restaurant downstairs, decorated with local paintings and African objects, serves good pizza and Lebanese fare (mains from US\$10), and has wi-fi.

Hotel Residencial Bahia (☎ 222921; Ave Conceição 4; s/d US\$70/80; ☎) The Bahia has a central location just behind the Mercado Municipal. Air-con rooms come with TV, bathroom and balconies, and there's a popular lunchtime restaurant and bar (meals from US\$7).

Hotel Residencial Avenida (☎ 241700; ravenida@costome.net; Ave da Independência; s/d US\$70/90; ☎) Has bright blue walls, a nice breakfast area and a bamboo bar.

Marlin Beach Hotel (☎ 222350; www.marlinbeach.com; r from US\$80) A bit north of town towards the airport and right across from the ocean, Marlin Beach has nice rooms and a gorgeous pool area. It's sister hotel is Bom-Bom Island Resort on Príncipe (see p606).

Hotel Miramar (☎ 222588, 222511; www.miramar.st; Ave Marginal 12 Julho; r from US\$145) One of the more popular top-end hotels, the Miramar has nicely decorated rooms with all the amenities, and a view of either the ocean or the beautiful pool and gardens. In the lobby, there is wi-fi access and an international restaurant, and just outside, an ocean-side café (below).

Cheap lodging is getting increasingly harder to come by in town, but there are some locals willing to host you in their homes for less than most of the *pensões* (guesthouses). It might be worth asking around at some of the travel agencies in town, or at **Café & Companhia** (☎ 226622; Praça da Amizade). **Nora Rizzo** (diacnat@costome.net), a local architect, rents out Casa Amarela, a house with a few bedrooms on the water that offers a great bargain for a group.

EATING

Teté (☎ 222355, 904353; Ave Marginal 12 Julho) From her lovely ocean-side home, Teté cooks and serves dinner. The simple meals of *con-con* or grilled squid with baked breadfruit are some of the best. Call ahead for special orders. The house is difficult to spot, but look for the collection of cars around a white gate.

O Pirata (☎ 907400; mains from US\$8) On the water south of town, this restaurant and cultural space rolled into one serves great meals in a wonderful atmosphere – local paintings cover the walls, and brush-wood sculptures and cool chill-out spaces abound.

Café & Companhia (☎ 226622; Praça da Amizade) For breakfast, this place has great omelettes and phenomenal homemade yogurt served with fruit or granola.

Sit across from an old airplane turned jungle-gym at **Pasteleria Kilumba** (Parque Popular) and munch on tasty pastries and snacks from US\$2. **Passante** (Ave Marginal 12 Julho), the Hotel Miramar's café across from the beach, is also a good choice.

Lunchtime favourites include **Pensão Turismo** (☎ 222340; Rua de Angola; meals US\$6), with

traditional meals, **Hotel Phenicia** (Ave Geovany), **Sum Secreta** (Ave Kwame N'Kruma), and **Papafigo** (Ave Kwame N'Kruma), which serves cheap pizza, burgers and *shwarma* (kebabs). Further north on the water, the Restaurant Bar Filomar and Bigodes are also good choices.

Next to the dock where the fishermen bring in the day's catch, **Paraíso dos Grelhados** (The Blue Container; Ave Marginal) serves great, cheap *con-con*. Further north on the road to the airport is Nanda, another hole-in-the-wall container reputedly serving the best and cheapest grilled fish in town. Both serve dinner daily; lunch only on weekends.

At the top end you'll find the hotel restaurants; **Hotel Miramar** (☎ 222588/222511; www.miramar.st; Ave Marginal 12 Julho) and Marlin Beach Hotel (p603) both serve good international cuisines.

DRINKING

Minigolf (Parque Popular) Has good drinks, minigolf, of course, and outdoor movies at 8pm nightly.

Happening happy hours include **Café & Companhia** (☎ 226622; Praça da Amizade) on Thursday at 6pm and Marlin Beach Hotel (p603) on Friday.

ENTERTAINMENT

Everyone heads to the clubs at night. The Tropicana, next to the power station, is popular with ministers, expats and the elite crowd. Across the street from the club is the attached bar where you can sing your heart out karaoke-ing.

Other popular clubs with the locals include Kizomba, Kudissanga and, just up the road in the town of Trinidad, the jumping '35.'

SHOPPING

Ossobo Ecosocial (☎ 227933; ossoboecosocial@costome.net; Praça da Juventude), run by a local NGO, is a great place to get ecofriendly handicrafts, arts and local food products.

Other artisanal shops include **Pica-Pau** (Ave Kwame N'Kruma), in front of Papafigo, and Grupo X in the District Madredeus.

Be aware that many craft shops sell souvenirs made of shells, coral and sometimes turtle shell. However, if you buy them you will be contributing to the harvesting of these resources, and you theoretically could be arrested if you try to bring them into your country.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Flights between São Tomé and Príncipe on **Air São Tomé** (☎ 221160) run three times weekly and cost around US\$180; it's necessary to reserve early. Be sure to check ahead of time that domestic flights are currently operating.

A cargo ship makes the trip every few days, but it is not recommended. If you're intent on doing the hot, day-long journey, head to the port for current times and cost.

GETTING AROUND

The airport is 4km north of the town centre; a taxi costs US\$4.

Ask around the Mercado Municipal in São Tomé town for bike rentals.

You can rent reasonably priced 4WD vehicles at **Navetur-Equator** (☎ 222122; www.navetur-equator.st), **Mistral Voyages** (☎ 23344; Rua Padre Pinto da Rocha) and the Marlin Beach Hotel (p603). Also check with the reception staff at some of the top-end hotels as they may rent out their private vehicles for cheaper rates.

Minibuses can be found at the Mercado Municipal in town. They leave for destinations north and south several times daily (from US\$2).

Taxis around town cost US\$2 to US\$7 depending on the distance and the mood of the driver.

AROUND SÃO TOMÉ

NORTH OF SÃO TOMÉ

The 50km road that leads north from São Tomé town is a dramatic, beautiful drive ending just past Santa Catarina on the north-west coast. There are deserted beaches all along the way, best found by 4WD, though it's possible to take public transport and hike in. Minibuses from São Tomé town will take you from US\$2, depending on where you get off.

Travelling north, the old **Roco Augustinho Neto** has sprawling grounds, stunning colonial architecture and botanical gardens.

Further north, down a dirt road is **Praia Mikoló**, where on weekends barbecues abound. Just past Mikoló village along the beach road is **Petisqueira Tartaruga**, a little spot with picnic tables under thatch roofs where fish, chicken and drinks are available.

Other good beaches north are **Praia Capitainja**, a whiter beach with clear water and

seasonal nesting turtles, and **Praia dos Governadores**, a small bay with clear water.

Past the small town of Guadalupe and a short walk off the road, **Praia das Conchas** and **Praia dos Tamarindos** are both considered the nicest beaches in the north. Nearby is **Lagoa Azul**, where there is excellent snorkelling but only a rocky beach.

At **Neves** village the charming Santola Restaurant serving enormous crabs (US\$6) is a weekend favourite.

Continue on to the old crumbling *roça* of **Monteforte** (s/d US\$40/50), which has gorgeous views of the mountains and seas. It's still a working farm on which guava, oranges and cacao is grown by the descendants of the old contract workers.

Beyond Monteforte you'll find more small towns and beaches.

SOUTH OF SÃO TOMÉ

The entire southern route takes about four hours' drive, and costs up to US\$5 on a minibus, depending on where you get off.

Heading south of São Tomé town you'll first hit **Pantufo**, where across from the Town Sq and charming colonial cathedral you can drink seaside on the hull of the **Navio Imperial**, a ginormous faux boat that opens only at night. There's a *pensão* **Estalagem Pantufo** (☎ 221941; conceicaoalvalerio@gmail.com; s/d US\$57/65) across the street that serves tasty Portuguese meals and is a good alternative to staying in São Tomé town.

Santana village is known mostly for **Club Santana** (☎ 242400; sreservas@csotome.net; bungalows from US\$120), a luxury resort with a lovely, calm beach and a Brazilian-influenced restaurant with a popular Saturday night buffet (US\$45). Boat trips can be arranged here or in town for the tiny **Ilha da Santana**, which has great waters for snorkelling.

Further south off the main road you can spend a few minutes tripping out on the mesmerising aqua blowhole of **Boca de Inferno**.

In this area, almost any side road towards the ocean will bring you to a scenic and secluded beach, including **Praia das Sete Ondas** and **Praia Micondó**. Ask locals how to get to both.

Just before the small village of **São João dos Angolares**, the colonial-era **Rocha San João** (☎ 225135/221333; www.ecocultura.st; s/d incl breakfast US\$40/50) has recently become a cultural and ecotourism centre-inn serving traditional

feasts by master chef and artist João Carlos Silva. From the *roça* you can explore the stunning natural landscape by bike, canoe or on foot (picnics and guides available). The few bedrooms are furnished with objects recovered from the destroyed estate and are candlelit at night, making the place stunningly romantic. A nice beach nearby is **Praia Grande**.

Past yet more lovely deserted beaches shaded by palm and coconut trees, and through more small villages, you eventually hit **Porto Alegre**, a small fishing village where the paved road ends. **Praia Piscina**, just past the village, is one of the nicest beaches on the island.

A fair walk from **Porto Alegre** (or a short 4WD drive) is **Jale Ec lodge** (☎ 222792; http://praiajale.free.fr; s/d US\$32/40), which has three lovely coco-palm huts and communal dining, all managed by the villagers. Jale sits on a lovely beach, **Praia Jalé**, where many sea turtles nest during the season. Tour the mangroves nearby, take locally guided treks into the forest, learn to fish traditionally or wander the beach trails. Proceeds support a local NGO and the nearby villages.

About 20 minutes by boat off the coast of Porto Alegre is **Ilhéu das Rolas**, which, in addition to having some of the nicest beaches (including the wonderful Praia Café), is cut in two by the equator line, which you can literally stand on. **Pestana Equador Island Resort** (☎ 261106; s/d US\$172/240) is a top-end resort specialising in solitude, diving and deep-sea fishing trips. It's possible to arrange a day trip for US\$35, including lunch and boat transfer. Boats leave from Ponta Baleia, a point a bit north of Porto Alegre and cost US\$13 each way without lunch.

WEST OF SÃO TOMÉ

There are many treks in and around the dramatic interior landscapes of the island. Many treks start at **Bom Sucesso**, an ecotourism camp with large maps of the park and a botanic garden. One of the most popular routes is the four-hour trek to **Lagoa Amelia**, from where you can overlook swampy mangroves replete with bird and plant life.

If you're up for a challenge, the two-day trip up and down the highest point on the island, **Pico de São Tomé** (2024m), will take you through four different forest belts.

A short detour from Bom Sucesso is the gorgeous **Cascades da São Nicolau**.

A stay at the old cacao plantation of **Bombaim** (s/d US\$48/64) is another great way to see the interior and tropical forests. At the crumbling *roça* you can see the old bullfighting ring, the decrepit hospital and the old plantation slave quarters. Miguel, a contract worker here for over 47 years, can give you great history lessons. Several hikes ranging from 3½ to seven hours can be trekked with a guide leading to **Monte Café**, **Lagoa Amelia**, the *roça* of **Agua Ize/Bernardo Faro** and **Rocha de São João Angolares**. Just down the road is the **Cascata de Bombaim**, a wonderful place for a refreshing swim.

PRÍNCIPE

Little Príncipe has a dramatic landscape of jutting volcanic mountains covered mostly by dense, virgin forest, dotted with old plantation estates from colonial times and ringed by perfect beaches with astonishingly clear water, including the picture-perfect **Banana Beach**, made famous by a Bacardi ad. Most of the action (and that term is used loosely around here) is either in Santo António, the tiny town, or the very upscale Bom Bom Island Resort off the northern end of the island, which has brought improved infrastructure and attracted some very well-off tourists. There is excellent snorkelling and some of the best deep-sea fishing waters in the world, and locals will negotiate renting boats or bikes with you or guiding you on treks. Príncipe is a practically undiscovered tropical paradise, and you're likely to be the only traveller on the island.

SANTO ANTÓNIO

This colonial town of faded, cracked, pastel buildings and charming gardens can be seen in just a few minutes. Sleepy doesn't even begin to describe it.

There are a few very basic *pensões* in town with no-frills rooms for around US\$15, including the Romar, with five rooms, and a bit further back amid some buildings being burst open by rooting trees, the bright blue Arca de Noé.

The **Palhota** (☎ 251060; pensaoalhotacstome.net; r from US\$65; ☺), a delightful little house with veranda and sitting room, manned by lovely Alex Metzger, is a step up, with 10 rooms all with TV, air-conditioning, hot water, shared bathroom and breakfast. Internet access and

international phone calls can be accessed here. Meals of grilled fish and banana or meat and rice cost about US\$15.

In the evening you can go out on the town (sort of) at one of the bars/discos on a little side street past the market that get going early and close before 1am.

Head to the port to hire local fishermen to take you to various beaches, including the pristine Banana Beach.

BOM BOM ISLAND RESORT

Walk into a postcard at **Bom Bom Island Resort** (☎ 251141, 251114; www.bom-bom.com; r incl board per person per night US\$225) situated on a deserted beach on Ilha do Bom Bom, surrounded by lush vegetation and emerald waters. Activities include treks, plantation tours, snorkelling, diving and the speciality, deep-sea fishing, but most people come to just relax. The little islet of Bom Bom is connected via a long walkway to Príncipe. Very cool.

SÃO TOMÉ & PRÍNCIPE DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Prices for *pensões* and hotels in São Tomé town start around US\$35 and go up to more than US\$200. *Roças* outside of town are cheaper, rustic and more interesting.

ACTIVITIES

The islands have great snorkelling, diving and some of the best deep-sea fishing in the world. Interior treks in the forest require a guide and can be arranged through local travel agencies.

BUSINESS HOURS

Businesses and small shops generally close around 12.30pm for long siestas and re-open around 3pm.

PRACTICALITIES

- Weights, measures and road distances use the metric system.
- Electricity supply is 220-240V AC (50Hz) and plugs are of the European two-round-pin variety.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

São Tomé is for the most part an exceedingly safe country. The influx of oil interests and tourism has increased some petty crime (like pick-pocketing). On deserted beaches keep an eye on your bags.

The roads and sidewalks also provide a myriad of opportunities to trip you up; watch out for potholes and open sewers.

The incidence of malaria, which has been a concern in the past, has been greatly reduced thanks to a Taiwanese spraying program.

As one of the few tourists, you can have an inordinate impact on this tiny country. A few years ago some tourists decided to show up like the Sugar Plum Fairy and throw candy out of their car window as they passed through villages. As a result, in some villages you will be bombarded by children – and adults – screaming at you for a *doce* (sweet) and it can get a bit hectic.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Santoméan Embassies & Consulates

Santoméan diplomatic representations abroad include the following:

Angola (☎ 244-2345677; Rua Eng Armando Andrade, 173, Mira-Mar, Luanda)

Belgium (☎ 322-734 8966; Ambassade.Sao.tome@skynet.com; 175 Av De Tervuren, Brussels)

Gabon (☎ 241-721527; Bord de Mer, Libreville)

Portugal (☎ 351-218 461 917; Ave Almirante Gago Coutinho 26, Lisbon)

USA (☎ 212-317 0533; 400 Park Ave, 7th fl, New York)

Embassies & Consulates in São Tomé & Príncipe

The following countries have embassies or consulates in São Tomé:

Angola (☎ 222376; embrang@costome.net; Ave Kwame N'kruma)

Equatorial Guinea (☎ 225427; Vila Maria, Estrada Nova)

France (☎ 222266, 221353; Bairro de Santo António)

Gabon (☎ 224434, 224436; Rua Damão)

Portugal (☎ 222470, 221130; eporstp@costome.net; Ave Marginal 12 de Julho)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Independence Day is celebrated across the islands on 12 July. **Mardi Gras**, held on the Tuesday before Lent, is also a big party.

Several times during the year various saints are honoured in **Saint Festivals** in different villages around the island. Villagers celebrate

with traditional ceremonies, food, music and dance. For a complete listing of festival days, see **Navetur-Equator** (www.navetur-equatour.st).

FOOD

Meals will cost about US\$5 on the cheap side, US\$7 to US\$15 midrange, and US\$15 and up at the top end.

HOLIDAYS

The following public holidays are observed in São Tomé and Príncipe:

New Year's Day 1 January

Good Friday March/April

Holy Saturday March/April

Easter Monday March/April

International Workers' Day 1 May

Independence Day 12 July

Christmas Day 25 December

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is available in São Tomé town and in Santo Antonio on Príncipe, and is reasonably priced.

MONEY

All purchases can be made in the local currency *dobras*, but often you can also pay in euros or US dollars or both, especially at tourist outlets and for big purchases. West or Central African CFA are generally not accepted.

There are no ATMs on the islands. Credit cards (MasterCard and Visa) are accepted only at the top-end hotels. Euros and US dollars, in cash or travellers cheques, are widely accepted at hotels, shops and restaurants, and can be changed at banks and at moneychangers at and around São Tomé town's Mercado Municipal.

POST & TELEPHONE

The central post office in São Tomé town is open during business hours unless staff decide to go home early. Letters to the USA or Europe cost about US\$1.

Public telephones are available at the telecommunications centre in São Tomé and in some larger towns.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Travel agencies in São Tomé town are the best resource for information, but a small government-run tourist office next to the post office can offer some information and sells maps.

VISAS

Visas are required by everyone, and can no longer be purchased on arrival at the airport unless you have pre-arranged permission from Migrations Services. Visas cost US\$30 to US\$60. One-day express visas can be purchased in Gabon for US\$60 (normally US\$30).

Visas for Onward Travel

Visas for Gabon can be purchased at its embassy in São Tomé town (see p607) and cost around US\$50.

TRANSPORT IN SÃO TOMÉ & PRÍNCIPE

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Almost all travellers arrive by air via Gabon or Portugal. Flights leave a few times weekly from Libreville (Gabon) with either **Air São Tomé** (☎ in São Tomé town 221160) or **Air Service Gabon**, costing around US\$350 to US\$450. Direct flights from Lisbon (Portugal) leave a few times weekly with TAP Air Portugal (flights from US\$1000). There are also now

DEPARTURE TAX

Departure tax hovers around US\$21, and is payable in euros, US dollars and dobras.

direct weekly flights to Angola, Ghana and Cape Verde with TAAAG Angolan Airlines.

FROM GABON

Air São Tomé (☎ 239221160)

Air Service Gabon (☎ 241-747118)

FROM PORTUGAL

TAP Air Portugal (☎ 351-707 205 700; www.flytap.com)

Sea

There is a cargo ship that leaves for São Tomé from Port Mole in Libreville (Gabon), though the journey is not recommended or safe, and won't save you that much cash.

GETTING AROUND

Air São Tomé (☎ 239221160) has flights from São Tomé to Príncipe three times weekly.

Cargo ships to Príncipe leave every few days; ask around at the port. For more details, see Getting There & Away (p604).

